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出版者	法政大学教養部
journal or publication title	法政大学教養部紀要．外国語学・外国文学編
volume	95
page range	51-66
year	1996-02
URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10114/3691">http://hdl.handle.net/10114/3691</a>

# The Formation of 'Kubla Khan'

Nobuo Takayama

## 1. Introduction

Among the poems of Coleridge, 'Kubla Khan' is thought to be the most fantastic and musical. The process of making this poem is generally considered mysterious, and it has been a legendary story. Therefore, it is interesting to note this mystery, and it is the purpose of this paper to try to analyse this process through a modern way of thinking.

It has been believed so far that 'Kubla Khan' was written in the state of hallucination caused by opium which the poet would take to have temporal recovery from his gouty or rheumatic pains. This theory still prevails among Coleridgeans. In my opinion, however, the formation of this poem deeply concerns a reverie or a vision in his dream rather than a hallucination brought forth by opium.

Coleridge knew that dreams had many functions, and he analysed his own dreams with great interest. He had two kinds of dreams and wrote them into his poems 'Kubla Khan' and 'The Pains of Sleep' respectively. The former is a pleasant dream and the latter is a painful one. It is necessary to clarify the reason why he had these kinds of dreams. When he was about to sleep, his pleasant or unpleasant feelings reflected upon his dreams, and in the case of 'Kubla Khan', small quantities of opium made him feel comfortable by releasing his pain and apprehension. This state of mind then led him to sleep.

We have to verify first that in sleeping, there is a special kind of stage in which a poet can make a poem. Then, we have to prove that

he could hold memories of the dream after he wakes from it. If these were proved to be true, we can believe that the poem 'Kubla Khan' was made in his dream as the poet himself declared. Therefore, In this paper, the author tries to examine these by utilizing a contemporary theory of sleep.

## 2. The kinds of sleep

Most of the romantic poets must have some intimate feelings with sleep, because they consider sleep to be the mother of dreams. Poets who love dreams borrow an array of ideas from them. Dreams seem to be a source and also an arena of their poetic imagination. In the world of dreams, many mysterious things happen without any hesitation, which have never arisen in our real world where we are waking and working. Over time and space, past events beyond the remote memories appear suddenly before our eyes in a dream. In addition, images of men and things appeared in a dream vary their forms in many ways, and these images change from pleasant to unpleasant or sometimes fearful forms according to the state of feelings of the person who is having the dreams. At the same time, the images molded in the dream vary themselves freely, and sometimes they are so deformed as they do not leave their original forms. But in this case, these deformed images are still recognised as the original.

The sleep which produces dreams brings fantastic images or figures to the poet as poetic materials. Accordingly, most of the poets are fond of such sleep, but in the case of Coleridge the affairs are slightly different, since he had two kinds of dreams as they are previously mentioned. He was especially afraid to have nightmares of which he describes as "nightmair". On the contrary, when he was healthy and had good moods, he surely had pleasant dreams as shown in 'Kubla Khan'.

Sleep does not work uniformly on all people. There are many

people who scarcely have dreams and who always have dreams during sleep. And most people do not remember the contents of their dreams, but a few people remember them very clearly. However, there are a lot of individual differences. If the impression of the dream is intensive, a person who has such dream could consider it as if it were real after he wakes. He has a strong sensation about the dream just after he has woken from it, and he can utilize it to his own poems. Coleridge is just a poet like this.

The state of Coleridge's sleep always depends on his bodily conditions. When he was in good health, he could sleep calmly and could have pleasant dreams, but when he was suffering from the pain caused by his own disease, he was troubled with nightmares all through the night. From these two aspects of sleep he thought of the two worlds, that is, the real and the unreal.

There is a great difference between 'Kubla Khan' and 'The Pains of Sleep'. The former was made in a stable mental condition of the poet who did not have any physical distress and the latter was written after his suffering from horrible dreams accompanied by pain. These poems were derived from his dreams, and we can clearly understand that they are deeply related to his sleeping conditions. To examine the relation between the poetic imagination and the conditions of sleep, it is better to begin with the study of the nature of sleep.

The theories of sleep in these years have developed radically, and it is very useful in applying the idea of one of these theories to the mechanism of poetical creation in the case of Coleridge. Therefore, it is necessary to study this new theory of sleep before we enter the research of the problem of the poetic creation of Coleridge.

Recently, studies of sleep has brought us the new knowledge of two kinds of sleep: REM and non-REM sleeps. REM is the abbreviation for "rapid eye movement", and in the state of REM we have dreams, during which our eyes move quickly, and that is an evidence that we are in a state of dream. This phenomenon was discovered at

the University of California in 1953, and after that this discovery has been very useful for the analysis of sleep. REM sleep is rather a shallow sleep and motor nerves of the human body are at rest, and the person in this sleeping stage cannot move his limbs at his own will. However, recollections of his past memories are extremely active although illogical and fantastic. In this state of sleep, the senses are mainly working not to the outer world but to his inner world only, but they are comparatively clear.

The sleep of a human being is divided into four stages on electrocephalograph. The first stage is called the REM period and the rests are called non-REM periods. In the non-REM periods, we sometimes have dreams, but they are fewer than in the REM periods, and in most of the cases, after we wake from the dream the largest part of the contents is perhaps forgotten. In these non-REM periods, motor nerves of man sometimes work, and the movements of limbs are possible. Therefore he never suffers from not being able to walk in his dream. On the contrary, he cannot move his limbs when he is being chased by some monster or ghost in his another type of dream. In this kind of dream appeared in a REM period, he always feels something horrible, and in most of the cases Coleridge's dreams are like this.

REM stages usually appear at intervals of about ninety minutes, that is, they take place every one and a half hour. The length of REM stage gradually becomes longer and it is longest at dawn. Therefore, a man who sleeps for nine hours has five times of REM stages during his sleep, but when he sleeps for six hours, he has them four times.

In the introduction to 'Kubla Khan', Coleridge describes as follows:

The Author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; ...<sup>(1)</sup>

If these words are true, Coleridge wrote this poem after he awoke from the second REM stage. Coleridge held the images which appeared in his dream, and he delineated them in the form of versed lines.

The REM sleep is a sleep of the body, and the head works as it works in the daytime. On the other hand, non-REM sleep is a sleep of the head. They work differently on the human mind, and REM sleep much concerns Coleridge's poetical creation.

It is remarkable to note that among the persons who recollect dreams clearly, there are some who can recognize the fact that he is now dreaming. Such a person is aware of himself in the dream, and can hold his dream firmly and remember it very clearly during and after the dream. When a person in the REM sleep, usually alpha waves are not detected, because it appears in the state of awakening. But from these special persons some alpha waves can be detected during their REM period. The brain activity of such a person considerably increases in this state of dream with the effects of lots of alpha waves. It is sure from many results of experiments that a man can be much more creative when he generates lots of alpha waves. Many alpha waves appear in meditation as in Zen or in marathon races, or when a person concentrates in something he is engaged in. In this mental state man can use his brain more than usual, but his limbs and body become much relaxed.

In the case of Coleridge, this special stage of sleep acted as a source of poetic motivation. In his age, physiology and psychology were not separated yet, he tried to understand human sleep in terms of Hartley's association theory. However, as the result of Coleridge's detailed observation and analysis, he noticed that dreams do not occur from the effect of association. He also noticed that there are many kinds and states in dreams, and that the reason why we can hold the contents of the dream lies in the process of its memory. Therefore, he strived to clarify the conditions of holding the memory of dream.

### 3. Coleridge's dream

Coleridge seemed to know the different stages of dreams. He tried to analyse dreams logically. In *The Statesman's Manual*, he mentions:

Even "the visions of the night" speak to us of powers within us that are not dreamt of in their day-dream of philosophy. The dreams, which we most often remember, are produced by the nascent sensations and inward motiunculae (the fluxions) of the waking state. Hence, too they are most capable of being remembered, because passing more gradually into our waking thoughts they are more likely to associate with our first perceptions after sleep. Accordingly, when the nervous system is approaching to the waking state, a sort of under-consciousness blended with our dreams, that in all, we imagine as seen or heard, our own self is the ventriloquist, and moves the slides in the magic-lantern. We dream *about* dreams!<sup>(2)</sup>

From a modern point of view, Coleridge's this observation about sleep refers to the REM phenomenon. He had already noticed the fact that about two hundred years later psychologists or physiologists laboriously came to discover. He mentions here the dream which occurs in a shallow sleep, and the shallowest sleep happens in the REM stage. In this stage of sleep, a person often wakes by sensing the sound or vibration of the outer world. And this stage is very similar to the waking state, and senses or thinking power can work as in his waking state, then he can see visionary things or hear unreal sounds.

Coleridge describes here "We dream about things" means that the dreaming self, the subject, holds the visionary things as the object, though they are all fantasies occurred in the visionary world of the poet.

We have to notice here first that Coleridge discovered the fact that a man dreams in the shallowest sleep. In the early eighteenth century, dreams were thought to be mysterious. In this period, some investigations on dreams were made by means of what we call physiological psychology, but they were only the observations from an empirical or associative point of view and dreams were regarded only as a repetition of the things that the dreamer had experienced in the daytime. Physiologists in general did not combine dreams with shallow sleep, and never regarded under-consciousness as a source of dreams, or maybe they never noticed about it. Accordingly, dreams were thought to be mysterious even among the scientists including physiologists and psychologists of that age.

From the prehistorical age, dreams might have been regarded as a mysterious thing. In the *Old Testament*, Joseph interpreted the Pharaoh's dream, and in those days the king's dream suggested the future of the nation. Among the barbarians, dreams had the same values as in the real world. In the early Anglo-Saxon law code, a man who did an evil thing in another person's dream should be punished. Thus, dreams had been considered to be enigmatic, holy, or mysterious until Coleridge's days, but he observed them in detail and studied them philosophically, and tried to analyse them from a scientific view.

The second important point that Coleridge discovered is the fact that images or thoughts which were not in his consciousness appeared in a dream and were mixed with memories of his past experiences. For example, these were the memories of Ottery St Mary in his infant days, or of the old dark friary of Christ's Hospital in his boyhood. He defined the memories which are not in the present as under-conscious. Namely, it was the discovery of unconsciousness. The memories of under-conscious or subconscious are blended with the dreamer's latest experiences, and they become big or small, or vary in forms or colours, according to his present feelings. In the world of dream, they are deformed and develop themselves in the various states.



The third point we have to discuss here is the discovery of the state of half-sleeping, in other words, half-awakening condition. Coleridge noticed that dreams are held by the brain when awakening, and at that time external things are perceived by eyes or ears. In this half-awakening state, visions and real things are mixed together. No one noticed, so far, that dreams are held in the memories by the awakening brain. They thought that dreams were seen only in the sleep and memorized by the brain during the sleep.

Coleridge's observation on dreams seems to be relevant from the modern point of view. His theory of dream had already advanced over a hundred years compared with others of his contemporaries. And, of course, this idea deeply concerns his creative work 'Kubla Khan'.

In addition to "dream about things", Coleridge defined another type of dream. It is a "dream the things themselves". In his *Statesman's Manual*, he mentions as follows:

But there are few persons of tender feelings and reflecting habits, who have not, more or less often in the course of their lives, experienced dreams of a very different kind, and during the profoundest sleep that is compatible with after-recollection ... States, of which it would be scarcely too bold to say that *we dream the things themselves*; so exact, minute, and vivid beyond all powers of ordinary memory is the portraiture, so marvellously perfect is our brief metempsychosis into the very *being*, as it were, of the person who seems to address us. If I may be allowed to quote from myself, (*Friend*, No.8) "the dullest wight is at times a Shakespeare in his dreams,"<sup>(3)</sup>

What he describes here is very similar to the special situation in the REM sleep. In this state, the dreamer's consciousness is perfectly working, which is not expected in ordinary dreams, and everything he has experienced is vividly held in his consciousness. When he is in

this state, the things in the dream are felt as if they were in the real world. Therefore, they are held in his brain as if they really exist. In this special occasion, he is conscious of the dream as reality.

In his state of the "dream the things themselves", he vividly felt and watched the objects in the dream very clearly, that is to say, his brain and sensory functions are working in the same conditions as in his waking state. Coleridge frequently experienced this state of dream. That is the reason why he notices such a state of sleep.

As stated above, from the latest researches, there are a few persons who are aware of themselves when dreaming. Only a very few person may have such a special dream, and in this case, we can watch alpha waves as it was previously noted. From that fact, it may be safely affirmed that his brain acts clearer than in the ordinary waking state, for in the former state his concentration is much stronger than in the latter state. The alpha waves usually appear in one's concentrated state of the mind. They are seen in the pure thinking state when there are no miscellaneous thoughts, and the mind works marvelously enough as it has never been seen in the waking conditions. Usually, the alpha waves hardly appear during sleep, but in the latest studies of sleep, they can be detected from some special people during their sleep. In fact, the persons who are able to have a "dream the things themselves" as Coleridge said, are limited in number. Therefore, it is considered to be a special case of the REM sleep.

#### **4. Waking sleep and poetry making**

We can call a special state of sleep the waking sleep which Coleridge defines as the "dream the things themselves". If a gifted poet like Coleridge were in this state, he could make a poem sufficiently, or rather superlatively. The deepest concentration is needed for the creative activities of the mind, and this state of mind brings the highest degree of his creation. In this stage, it is possible to make poetic lines

of two or three hundred as he declared himself, and during this time his poetic soul works actively and freely severed from the miscellaneous affairs of the outer world. Perhaps, he was making a poem noticing himself in the dream, and thus he made 'Kubla Khan'.

There is another piece evidence that proves that this poem was made in a REM sleep as we previously noticed. This is the second REM period. As already mentioned, the REM stages appear every ninety minutes, and as the sleeping time advances, the REM period becomes longer. That means the dreaming time becomes longer, and then the dream in the early morning is longest. We have a dream in the deepest stage of sleep, but we scarcely remember the content of the dream. The dream we remember after waking is the dream we have in the REM period.

The first REM stage appears one and a half hour after a man has fallen into the sleep, and the second REM stage occurs three hours after the beginning of the sleep. There is an important coincidence between Coleridge's words and the REM theory. We must remember here again his explanation in the preface to "Kubla Khan". After he took a dose of anodyne, he smoothly fell sound asleep, and about three hours later he woke from the sleep, then he quickly wrote down the lines he had in the dream. It is clear that he had a dream in the second REM stage. That dream is not a vision caused by opium, but a genuine dream during the second REM stage of the sleep induced by some anodyne. This is the most important point. It should be emphasized here that a dose of opium only acted as an inducement or a trigger to a sleep in this case. If Coleridge had had a large quantity of opium, his brain should have been so confused as he could not have thought logically enough to compose a beautifully arranged verse like "Kubla Khan".

The poem "Kubla Khan" has a lot of features from dreams. In the first place, it is a feature of dream that the figures or forms held in the memories are deformed, and this is seen in the poem. We think of

a distorted form like "Dali's Watch" in a dream. The forms of the things in a dream often wildly vary themselves, though the ideas of things are not intact. The concepts of the things remain so far as they continue through the dream, while their forms usually change radically. The stream of water in 'Kubla Khan' changes its form from a rill to a sacred river and to a lifeless ocean. The palace of Kubla is located along the Alph river which is associated with Greek mythology, and around it there is a romantic chasm, from which a mighty fountain was forced, and finally runs into a lifeless ocean. Only the ideas are unchangeable and coherent all through the dream, but the substantial forms are always changing. We never think of a lifeless ocean in the real world.

The second feature of dream lies in the liberation of time and space. Although a dreamer is an aged man, he can act as a child in the dream, where past and present are mixed together. The period when Kubla lived was in the remote days of the Middle Ages, and Coleridge wished not only to peep at but also enter into the Kubla's garden and paradise, but he tries to make himself a hero in the dream. It is an event beyond time.

There are some scenes in China, a mysterious river flowing underground, and an Abyssinian maid playing a dulcimer in this poem. Things from China, Greece, and Egypt can be seen. Things from different lands are blended together, and these are not restricted to space, that is to say, beyond space. The dreamer, Coleridge, indulged in exotic emotions.

The third feature of dream is that in a dream there are not only pleasant but also restless feelings. When a man is in bad health, he sometimes has a dream of being chased by a monster or a ghost during the REM stages, and he cannot move his legs so easily or feels much weight on his shoulders. A REM sleep is the sleep of the body and limbs as noted previously, and his motor nerves do not move at his own will. In this case, when a man rolls over on the other side and

feels some pain or numbness on that part of the body, the situation in the dream quickly changes to something fearful or painful. Therefore, the mental structure in a dream is very unstable.

Kubla lived in a stately dome and had a large garden guarded by high and long walls, and he heard ancestral voices prophesying war amid the tumult of a mighty fountain sprung from the romantic chasm. Also in this dream, there appears a mysterious river that runs underground and flows into the ocean where no life lives. All these exist in parallel with the pleasure-dome and the beautiful garden in this world of dreams. Pleasure and fearfulness coexist side by side, and that means none other than a feature of the dream.

The fourth feature of dream is that a hero in the dream is the dreamer himself and the others never become such heroes. The dream is the world of one's self. All the feelings including pleasure, anger, sadness, and happiness belong to himself alone. No dream has ever existed only for others. There is no objectivity in dream. Perhaps, one's self is happy when he sees that his intimate person is happy enough in a dream. In this case, he has a priority of feelings over that of others. In "Kubla Khan", the hero is not Kubla but Coleridge himself. Kubla is thought of as the hero of the poem in the beginning, but soon another image emerges, because Coleridge is the dreamer of this dream. It is not Kubla but Coleridge, the dreamer, who heard the tune of dulcimer that an Abyssinian maid played. Therefore, in this scene the feelings of the dreamer are predominant, and this fact proves that the poem is derived from the dream.

From the facts above mentioned, we can safely affirm that "Kubla Khan" is described from the memories of Coleridge's dream after he awoke.

## 5. The possibility of automatism

According to Coleridge's remarks, 'Kubla Khan' was written

from his memories without any trouble after he had awaked from the dream. It may be doubted whether such a poem could have been written by means of this method, but in the case of Coleridge, perhaps it was possible to make a poem from the memories of his dream. A poet in general constructs a verbal expression carefully in his brain by meditating experiences and selecting relevant words for the most beautiful arrangement. However, a few people can make poems instantly with their imagination. It is a phenomenon called "automatism".

The possibility of automatism has been said to be present since ancient times, but it could not be recognised as a definite way of making poetry, because it lacked scientific demonstrations. It was treated as the nonsense of a lunatic, or rather, as an inherent technique of a genius. Therefore, it has surely no generality, and many people never think of this problem. To have the generality, this phenomenon needs repetitions, but the same automatism cannot be repeated again, and other people never can understand it. This means that there is no objectivity. However some poets have pointed out the possibility.

Alfred de Musset, a nineteenth century poet of France, said that the creation of poetry is to "listen". According to him, a poem is written by listening to the voices whispered into his ear by a stranger.<sup>(4)</sup>

A German mystic, Jakob Boeme, wrote his works with the help of his inner voices. It is a kind of revelation, and there is no room for him to consider about it and there is no literary logic behind it. He only follows the indication of the Spirit.<sup>(5)</sup>

Although these automatic writings were experienced by many poets, no scientific analysis had been made until recently. However, in the middle of this century, Herbert Read gave some comments on this phenomenon as follows:

Automatism is the phenomenon to be investigated, but I ought perhaps to give a more precise definition of the words. To some people it merely conveys spiritualistic procedures which make use of

instruments like the planchette, or perhaps any form of communication made in a condition of induced hypnosis. But by automatism in the present context we mean a state of mind in which expression is immediate and instinctive ... where there is no time-gap between the image and its verbal equivalent.<sup>(6)</sup>

We must notice here that he gave a kind of definition on this phenomenon from the psychological point of view. According to his definition, automatism is a state of mind in which expression is immediate and instinctive, and there is no time-gap between the image that appeared in the dream and the verbal expression. He has an interest in the relation between dream and poetry, and he describes that poetry of this kind tends to be strongly rhythmical, though this rhythm is also unconscious and instinctive.<sup>(7)</sup>

Read also refers to "Kubla Khan", as an example of this kind of poetry. He thinks this poem was written in a state of trance or automatism, and in this state the images of the dream draw words from memory as a magnet might draw needles from a haystack.<sup>(8)</sup>

Among other poets who have a strong interest in automatism are E. A. Poe and D. H. Lawrence. As Lawrence said, the most superb mystery we have hardly recognized is the immediate and instant self that acts as a poetry creator in the pure present.<sup>(9)</sup> I think that the moment of self-concentration which T. S. Eliot calls the "still point" is a variation of this state of trance. Anyway, such a time of pure experience which many poets have experience has a close relation to automatism.

Read mentions three cases of failure in automatism: firstly, any intervention of conscious or intellectual control would have brought the process of writing to an immediate end; secondary, any but most trivial amendments would have distorted its mythical unity; and thirdly, the poem must stand or fall in its integrity.<sup>(10)</sup>

The process of automatism is almost believed to really exist but

seems to be mysterious, because there is no investigation on mental activity during a dream. If we think of this activity we can confirm poetic creation in a dream and understand that the memory of it is kept firmly as a verbal expression, that is, poetry. From this point of view, we can understand this phenomenon as a kind of literary recording of the clearest memory in a REM sleep.

As we have already discussed, the creative mind of human beings act most effectively in the specified stage of the REM sleep, where Coleridge can "dream the things themselves". This is the most relevant condition for the poetic mind to provide the highest concentration.

## 6. Conclusion

As we have studied above, we can very clearly understand the process of the formation of "Kubla Khan" by utilizing the latest theory of sleep. About two hundred years ago, Coleridge came to think about the modern idea concerning sleep. He never thought the process of this poem to be a mystery, and he pursued its formative mechanism by showing his psychological curiosity as he described it in the preface to the poem. This fact suggests that he had a positive mind to study about dreams, and this point is different from his other contemporaries.

Therefore, we can affirmingly deny the prevailing theory that his "Kubla Khan" was made in the state of hallucination caused by opium. No disordered brain caused by a narcotic medicine ever produced such an orderly arranged verse as "Kubla Khan" in which the words are finely arranged with logical rhymes and beautiful rhythms.

The study that Coleridge had already begun is now elucidated with the help of a new psychological theory, and this proves that his observation was rightly appropriate not only to a poet, but also to what is called a psychologist.

Therefore, we can call Coleridge a genius, as well as a great poet



who thoroughly knew the mental phenomena of human beings.

《Notes》

- (1) *PW*, I. 296.
- (2) *Lay Sermon* ed. R. J. White (Princeton: Princeton U.P./Kegan Paul, 1972), p.80.
- (3) *Loc. cit.*
- (4) John Fergson, *Encyclopedia of Mysticism and Mystery Religion* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1976), p.22.
- (5) *Loc. cit.*
- (6) Herbert Read, *Collected Essays in Literary Criticism* (London Faber & Faber, 1950), p.108.
- (7) *Ibid.*, p.109.
- (8) *Ibid.*, p.108.
- (9) *Ibid.*, p.109.
- (10) *Ibid.*, p.115.